

Stan Swamy: A life dedicated to upliftment of Adivasis

Stan Swamy, a man who worked for the upliftment of adivasis in eastern tribal states, died on Monday in Mumbai. A Jesuit priest, he took up the causes of tribals marginalised after their lands had been taken over for dams, mines and townships.

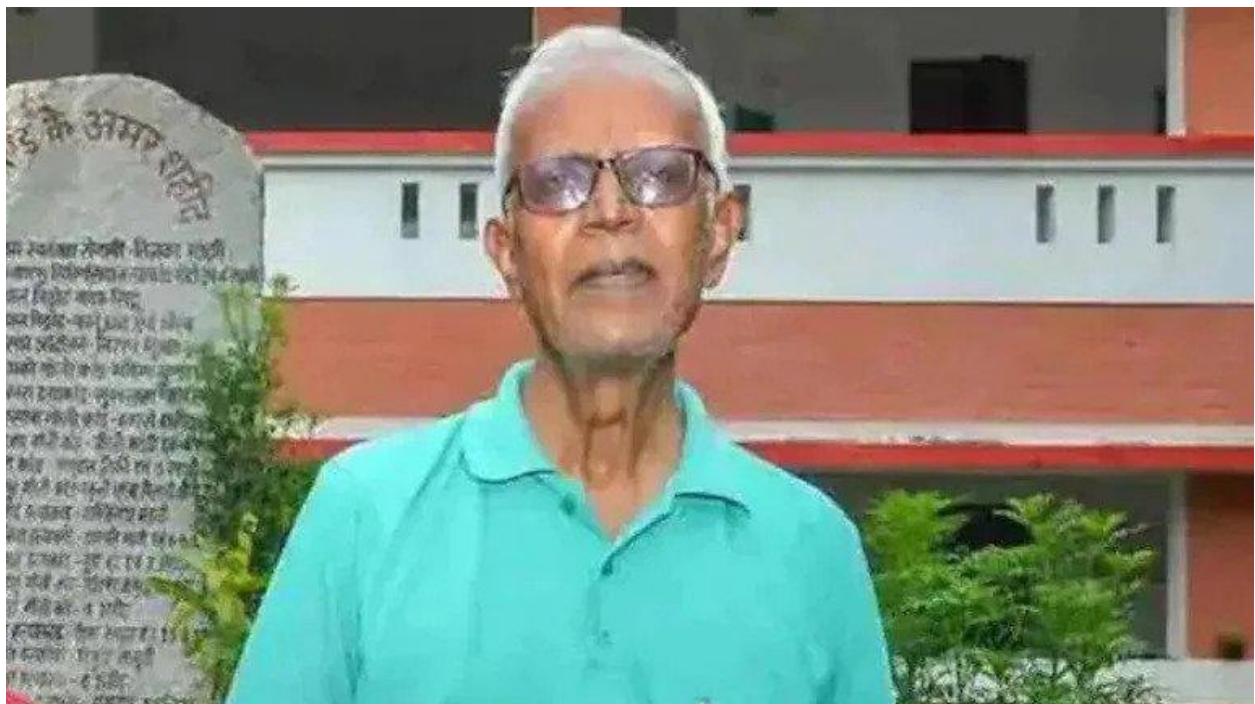


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Tribal rights activist Stan Swamy, an accused in the Elgar Parishad-Maoists links case, died on Monday. (Photo: PTI file)

The words "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race," from the Bible seems to sum up the life of Stanislaus Lourdusamy, 84 or "Stan Swamy" as he was known.

Swamy , a Jesuit priest, who spent long years working among his beloved Adivasis in this eastern Indian tribal state, [died on Monday in Mumbai](#), hours before his appeal for bail in a case where he is ironically accused of being an 'Urban Naxal' was to be heard.

"I was the one present when Stan was arrested. Born in Tamil Nadu on April 26, 1937, he entered Jamshedpur Province of the Society of Jesus or the Jesuits to become a Jesuit priest and work in the tribal regions of what is now Jharkhand," David Solomon SJ, former Director of Bagaicha, a civil society organisation which Swamy helped found, told PTI. Solomon added that Swamy chose to "dedicate his life to poor tribals after he was ordained a priest on April 14, 1970."

Swamy studied theology and did a Masters in Sociology at the University of Manila after joining the Jesuit order. Later he studied at Brussels where he struck up a friendship with Archbishop Holder Camara whose work among Brazil's poor influenced him.

From 1975 till 1986, he served as Director of the Jesuit-run Indian Social Institute at Bangalore.

STAN SWAMY'S WORK IN JHARKHAND

However, Jharkhand and work among the poor tribals of the state kept calling to Swamy and he came back some thirty years ago and took up work among the Adivasis.

While working among them, he took up the causes of tribals marginalised after their lands had been taken over for dams, mines and townships, often without their consent.

Father Stan tirelessly served on various issues of the Adivasi communities for their upliftment and welfare by taking up issues related to their constitutional rights, land rights, forest rights, labour rights and representation of the community members in the state of Jharkhand, Solomon said.

He was vocal about the "indiscriminate" arrest of thousands of young adivasis by investigating agencies after labelling them as "Naxals" and had filed a public interest petition in the Jharkhand High Court against the state, asking for all such undertrial prisoners to be released on a personal bond, and also for conducting a speedy trial.

Swamy while working among tribals, also started raising questions on the non-implementation of the 5th Schedule of the Constitution which provides for setting up Tribe Advisory Councils where tribals are members to run the affairs of tribal areas.

While this made him popular among the Adivasis, it also pitted him against strong political forces.

He also lobbied to have the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act [PESA], 1996 implemented to give greater voice to Adivasis.

Another of his movements which sought implementation of a Supreme Court order which said "Owner of the land is also the owner of sub-soil minerals" made him extremely unpopular with the mining barons who have a stranglehold on the state's economy.

Bagicha, the NGO he helped found which filed the case on behalf of adivasi youths seeking their early release pointed out among other things that these undertrials were languishing in prison even as sanction for their prosecution remained pending for three to four years.

The case placed both Stan Swamy and Bagiacha in the crosshairs of police investigators who did not take kindly to this attempt at judicial intervention, his close associates said.

ON ADIVASI PRISONERS IN JHARKHAND

In 2016, moved by the plight of Adivasi prisoners in Jharkhand, Swamy had done a research on them titled "Deprived of rights over natural resources, impoverished Adivasis get prison: a study of Undertrials in Jharkhand" and this was among papers submitted to the court.

His study found that 97 per cent of undertrials interviewed said that allegations that they were linked to Maoists were false, and 96 per cent of them earned less than Rs 5,000 a month, underlining the fact the poorest and the most vulnerable in the state were the among the ones arrested under stringent anti-terror laws.

It also found that 31 per cent of under trials and a little over a third of the convicts were tribals. The percentage of tribals in jail was far higher than their proportion of the population.

His study was considered authoritative but also discomfited the powers that be, as uncomfortable issues were being raised.

Solomon claimed that the Pune police had raided and interrogated Stan in Bagaicha, his home in Ranchi twice once on 28 August 2018, and 12 June 2019, accusing him of having links with the Bhima Koregaon case.

"According to Stan, during the interrogation police were trying to implicate him in false cases. The questioning by the police was motivated. He said "it had everything to do to somehow establish that I am personally linked to extremist leftist forces, (and) that through me Bagaicha is also relating to some Maoists. Swamy said. I denied both these allegations in [the] strongest terms, Solomon said.

"He was raising his voice in democratic, legitimate ways against state-sponsored violations of laws and assault on democratic rights of people aimed at paving way for unrestricted exploitation of land and natural resources. This includes a case he has filed to give justice to around 3000 people who were either taken into custody or went missing for raising voice against violations of law, in Jharkhand," his aide claimed.

BHIMA KOREGAON CASE

Two days before NIA took him into custody in connection with the Bhima Koregaon case, the Jesuit priest claimed stringent laws such as UAPA were being misused to arrest tribals "indiscriminately" in a video message. The National Investigation Agency (NIA) on October 9, last year had filed a charge-sheet against eight people, including Father Stan Swamy, for their alleged involvement in inciting a mob to violence in Bhima Koregaon near Pune on January 1, 2018.

Swamy, a cancer patient who also suffered from the Parkinsons disease, was arrested from his home in Ranchi on October 8, 2020. Despite protestations that he had never been to Bhima Koregaon, he was still taken to Mumbai where he was produced before a court and remanded to judicial custody.

He is possibly the oldest person to be charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), officials had then said.

NIA officials had said investigations established he was actively involved with the CPI (Maoist).

The NIA also alleged that he was in contact with "conspirators" to further the group's activities.

Besides, he was convenor of the Persecuted Prisoners Solidarity Committee (PPSC), which the authorities dubbed a frontal organisation of the CPI(Maoist).

They said literature, propaganda material of the CPI (Maoist) and documents related to communications for furthering the group's programmes were seized from his possession.

Swamy on his part had alleged that material had been planted on his computer and he was being falsely accused.

Ahead of his arrest, Swamy had posted a video saying the NIA had been interrogating him and had questioned him for 15 hours during a span of five days.

"I have never been to Bhima Koregaon for which I am being accused," he had said.

"What is happening to me is not something unique or happening to me alone, it is a broader process taking place all over the country. We all are aware how prominent intellectuals, lawyers, writers, poets, activists, student leaders are all put in jail because they have expressed their dissent or raised questions about the ruling powers of India," Swamy had said in the video.

He had said he is part of "the process" and in a way happy to be so because he was not a silent spectator and is part of the game.

"I am ready to pay the price whatever be it," Swamy had said.